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HEADHUNTING THE TASTEMAKERS

Matt Seybold

Poet-Critics and The Administration of Culture by Evan Kindley.
176 pp. Cambridge, MA:
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Hardcover, \$35.00.

In the summer of 1936, John Maynard Keynes led an audiotour of the literary marketplace for BBC Radio. While the author of the recently published *General Theory* (1936) had a few complaints—for instance, that some modernist novelists thought it “almost a virtue . . . to empty on us the slops of [their] mind just as they come”—he found much more to recommend in every medium and genre he surveyed. Predictably, he praised friends like Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, and Lytton Strachey. But he also lauded obscure memoirists, journalists, mystery novelists, and pop psychologists. “Trash can be delightful,” Keynes mused, “and, indeed, a necessary part of one’s daily diet.” Only by consuming a range of literary products, including newspapers, poetry magazines, polemical pamphlets, serial novels, and what Keynes calls the “skimming autobiography” could one learn to “read as easily as you breathe,” a skill which Keynes implies is imperative to “the evolution of the contemporary world.” He implores the imagined BBC listener to “acquire a wide general acquaintance with books,” “approach them with all his senses,” “touch[] many thousands, at least ten times as many as he really reads,” “walk the rounds of the bookshops, dipping in as curiosity dictates,” and “reaching in a few seconds a first intuitive impression of what they contain.”¹

Keynes's commentary captures one of the paradoxes of literary modernism: despite the decade-long transatlantic depression, there seems to have been a thriving and diversified market for Anglophone literature, and a disproportionate degree of security and stability enjoyed by modernist writers in the US and UK during the interbellum. Evan Kindley's *Poet-Critics and the Administration of Culture* (2017) interrogates this paradox. Kindley is preceded across portions of this terrain by scholars like Paul Delany, Mark McGurl, Lawrence Rainey, and Michael Szalay, but this book is distinguished by its attention to the careers of a specific subset of poet-critics who "participated, as none of their predecessors had or could have, in the life of the bureaucracy, aligning themselves with large institutions at a time of radical instability in the cultural economy" (4). It was largely the poet-critics' talent for making what Keynes terms "delightful trash" which prepared them for the bureaucracies that shielded them from financial insecurity and, perhaps unexpectedly, much excellent poetry was made under this shelter.

Kindley acknowledges that "the market for fiction did not appreciably contract during the Great Depression," but while novelists, journalists, and other professional prose-writers largely evaded "the parlous economic climate," poets were treated as purveyors of an

expendable "luxury good," and thus "the crash of 1929 hit poet-critics as hard as any other group of writers or intellectuals, and in some ways harder" (73). The ensuing vicious cycle wiped out publishers and patrons, crippling the already precarious infrastructure that subsidized poetry's waning popular appeal. But the poet-critic's ancillary role has always been that of (as Gertrude Stein calls Ezra Pound) "village explainer" (1) and Kindley argues "the Depression—and the attendant expansion of the American welfare state—also created new opportunities for village explainers" (73). There were New Deal programs that directly employed poet-critics like Archibald MacLeish and Sterling Brown in research, editorial, and public humanities projects, and the Roosevelt administration further aided poet-critics by subsidizing public arts initiatives, flailing charitable organizations, and higher education institutions. As Kindley shows, New Deal dollars took a circuitous path to the pockets of even poet-critics, like William Carlos Williams, who were critical of government and nation, or reticent on principle (in quasi-libertarian fashion) about intervention in the culture market.

Kindley asserts, "There is no modernism without its village explainers" (3). But the poet-critics he tracks all struggle, both pragmatically and ideologically, to find

a comfortable balance between their dual callings. Clearly, it is the *critic* portion of their identities that qualifies them for positions at the Rockefeller Foundation, the Library of Congress, and Cambridge, but it is as *poets* that they imagine and produce their literary legacies, often inspired explicitly by standards of innovation and tradition put forth by the preceding generation of poet-critics, notably Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. Kindley does not take the position, common among midcentury critics, that the “day jobs” of poet-critics slowed or otherwise diminished their production of poetry. To the contrary, in careful readings he demonstrates how much modernist poetry is enriched, in both argument and evocation, by the daily occupations that brought poet-critics in close contact with politicians, bureaucrats, students, and laborers, many of whom proceeded to populate the poetic imagination.

If anything suffers, it would seem, it is criticism. Though critical talents qualified poet-critics for what we might think of as the “alt-ac” work of the interbellum, those talents were not necessarily put directly or transparently to work in the production of organic criticism like that which they had written in the little magazines of the teens and twenties. Particularly powerful in this respect is Kindley’s analysis of how the exhaustive work done by Roscoe Lewis and other

African-American writers in the production of field guides for the Federal Writers Project went largely unrewarded and unrecognized, reproducing the labor exploitation FWP researchers were supposed to be exposing and overcoming. As Kindley puts it, a “desire to protect an undifferentiated image of a seamless, nonegoistic, cooperative society resulted in the government’s failure to acknowledge the contributions of some of that society’s most disadvantaged and underrepresented citizens” (105).

Kindley writes lucid prose and keeps *Poet-Critics and The Administration of Culture* to an extremely manageable length. This combination of clarity and concision is among the qualities most recommending the book, but it also means that some chapters will leave specialists wanting more. The chapter on Eliot focuses on his contributions to building both the ethos and consumer demand for the poet-critic as a book reviewer, essayist, magazine editor, and fundraiser. This focus establishes two threads essential to Kindley’s argument: the complex tension between the creative and analytical objectives of poet-critics, and the importance of fledgling modernist publications, even when they were underfunded and poorly managed, in preparing poet-critics for their integration into the administrative culture. While

the chapter efficiently moves the book's argument forward, one cannot help but wonder how Kindley would interpret the poetry (and criticism) associated with Eliot's other administrative positions at Faber & Faber and Lloyds Bank. When Kindley states that "in the late 1910s and early 1920s Eliot was deriving the bulk of his income from freelance book reviews" (31), he is in error, as during this era Eliot was employed fulltime (and promoted several times) by Lloyds. But I also want to reiterate that I think it is actually a strength of this book that it often left me wanting a little more, rather than being exhausted by the thorough exploration of every tangent.

Kindley's exploration of the educational experiences of the "Auden generation" in his chapter on "Student Bodies" is particularly haunting, as it captures, largely through Auden's *The Orators*, feelings, shared by students and faculty, of being politically neutered by the academic institutions which protect them economically. The critiques that are the lifeblood of scholastic environments prove "ultimately irrelevant to the extramural world outside the school" and "the moral habits inculcated by good teachers or sound disciplines, are unlikely to persist long on the outside" (70). I strongly recommend avoiding this chapter on days you have class, but, without venturing into the overcrowded and potentially

navel-gazing field of university studies, Kindley reminds us that the administrative culture of the university, often presented as rooted and rigorous, is actually quite young, circumstantial, and improvisatory.

Poet-Critics and The Administration of Culture is a book about, as Kindley phrases it, the "idea of institutionalization" (143), which also happens to reveal that the implementation of institutionalization progresses like Keynes in a bookshop, compulsively and haphazardly, prioritizing convenience and curiosity over empiricism and strategic planning. Kindley reveals that New Deal programs, public universities, and philanthropic foundations, all frequently held up, by defenders and detractors alike, as exemplary of planned economy, are more accurately understood as developed through the process of spontaneous order. As these institutions are increasingly subjected to reductive partisan attacks, which frequently provoke equally sanctimonious defenses from those embedded in their administrative cultures, it is clarifying to consider them through the eyes of poet-critics at an originary (or at least epochal) moment.

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NOTE

1. John Maynard Keynes, "On Reading Books," in *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes*, Vol. XXVIII: *Social, Political, and Literary Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982: 329–335.

